

The simple truth of integrity

Turfgrass certification protects more than just grass

by Bryan Tolar, Tolar Capitol Partners



Symbolism is great, but integrity is what matters. It's a universal truth that confidence in a person or product sustains brand value, whether for automobiles, electronics, whiskey – you name it. With stiff competition in the marketplace and ne'er-do-wells pitching knockoffs, the integrity of a product and faith in the people behind it cannot be faked, undercut or understated.

So it is with turfgrass. A certified cultivar is more than just grass – it's turfgrass with integrity.

Consider Tiffany & Co. For nearly 200 years, Tiffany's little blue box has been its statement of quality, even before the fine jewelry inside is visible. The distinctive, trademarked "Tiffany Blue" creates breathtaking anticipation because of the integrity of its brand: sought-after elegance, renowned craftsmanship and international prestige.

Tiffany's marketing slogan? "Who said red is the color of love?"

Such stature is earned.

Tiffany's fine jewelry is usually reserved for special occasions then carefully stored away until the next wear. Consider the expectations, then, for a product undergoing regular use. One visible for all to appreciate on a daily basis. Should your expectations for turfgrass be anything less?

Choosing a top turfgrass cultivar and utilizing a robust, respected third-party certification program solidifies the integrity of the cultivar and the brand of the farm that produced it. Such trustworthiness is at the core of integrity. It takes years to earn it but can easily be lost.

Validation of your trustworthiness must be constant. Doing so will increase the value of your products and your business – it means everything. It is your "blue box" of consumer anticipation.

"You're either elite or you're not," says University of Georgia Head Football Coach Kirby Smart. A certified winner himself, Coach Smart should know.

What's the value of certification for turfgrass? According to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, a certification mark shows consumers "that particular goods and/or services, or their providers, have met certain standards."

In short, certification by the state crop improvement association provides a process attesting to a level of achievement.

So it stands that obtaining and protecting the integrity provided by turfgrass certification can make a sod grower elite.

The process adds value and elevates the product to a higher level. Not only that, but turfgrass certification validates being invested in industry oversight that solidifies your integrity as a producer.

Not all turfgrass cultivars can be certified by the state crop improvement association because the rigorous comparative evaluation standards and scientific peer review can't be met, but those that can, should.

Standing behind the product

The ultimate responsibility for protecting the purity of a turfgrass cultivar lies with the grower, through farming practices. Turfgrass certification is not just for the grower, however. It is also a commitment to grow the best, backed by rigorous third-party oversight, to assure the earned integrity customers are seeking. State authorities, as appropriate, and licensees of the cultivars also play a critical role in this process of achieving and maintaining integrity. There is no substitute, and presenting such certification to buyers and end-users demonstrates these

products are the best the market has to offer; that you stand behind your product. Remember, you're either elite or you're not.

The importance of that blue tag

Each state operates a Crop Improvement Association Certification (CIAC) program. The blue tag of these crop improvement associations is the ultimate quality control marker for warm season, vegetatively produced turfgrass cultivars. Blue tag validation shows landscapers, contractors, and consumers that the sod meets all state CIAC rules and regulations.

No blue tag means "no certification." While its absence is not necessarily a sign of a bad actor, the CIAC blue tag serves as a warranty by preventing the sale of turfgrass varieties in the certification program when contamination is documented and not properly rectified. "Certification is the highest quality classification in our industry," asserts Charles Harris, the CEO and co-founder of Buy Sod, Inc.

Buy Sod operates sod farms in five states and is enrolled in the CIAC program in each because Harris sees the added value of a high confidence level in quality turfgrass for his company and customers: "It validates the best products of the highest quality. That's where we want to be."

"I believe CIAC is the standard for what it means to achieve the best quality plant material," says Harris, whose company is based in Pinehurst, NC. "These inspections have teeth. They matter. Professionals in turf management as well as consumers have high expectations that can only be met by a rigorous third-party certification process. We are proud to support and participate in these initiatives. It's a differentiator and makes us better."

Paths to integrity

Multiple paths lead to increased integrity. Agribusinesses licensing turfgrass cultivars rely on third-party certification and inspection programs as they move to commercial production. Genetic purity is essential at each step, from breeder, to foundation, to nursery, to production.

The Turfgrass Group is among the licensors of turfgrass cultivars. The Cartersville, Ga., organization's commitment to excellence ensures its licensed growers – "Certified Growers" – are in a position to be elite. Bill Carraway, Vice President of Sales and Marketing with The Turfgrass Group, Inc. proclaims, "Certification is a fundamental imperative by which we operate. Maintaining the genetic integrity and provenance of our cultivars is what sets us apart."

That commitment starts with complying with respective state certification standards and licensing a limited number of certified producers. Farm visits, inspection, and quality control reviews throughout the production process are all mandatory, critical steps in the process.

Dr. Brian Schwartz is a professor of turfgrass breeding and genetics at the University of Georgia. As one of the nation's top turfgrass breeders, Dr. Schwartz is on the patent for at least three turfgrass cultivars. His resume includes a Ph.D. in plant breeding from the University of Florida and a B.S. and M.S. from Texas A&M University. It's no surprise this scientist looks even beyond the assurance of the CIAC blue tag and hones in on third-party certification as preservation of the research process.

"When properly implemented and enforced, it stops problems," Dr. Schwartz says. "Investing in a breeding program to develop emerging cultivars only makes sense if steps are being taken to protect them from contamination. I believe in the certification system. I know it delivers the highest quality product with the most value. It is the only way to protect the integrity of plant performance over time."

Integrity represents a reputation for hard work and excellence. For turfgrass, third-party certification is the outward demonstration of an internal commitment to integrity. It is Tiffany's "blue box" and eliminates "seeds of doubt."

<p style="text-align: center;">GEORGIA CERTIFIED TURFGRASS</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><small>Integrity Warranty Disclaimer</small></p> <p><small>The grass in this certificate represents sod produced in accordance with the published standards of the Georgia Crop Improvement Association (GCIA). This GCI makes no warranty of any kind, expressed or implied, including merchantability, or fitness for purpose. The grower whose name appears on this certificate is solely responsible for the information thereon and for the proper use of this certificate.</small></p> <p>Kind: <u>Bermuda</u></p> <p>Variety/Brand: <u>Tifway</u></p> <p>Quantity:</p> <p>SPRIGS: _____</p> <p>SOD: <u>7500 Square Feet</u></p> <p>Billing Invoice: <u>5496</u></p> <p>Field: <u>West 1</u></p> <p>Harvest Date: <u>Tuesday May 9, 2023</u></p> <p>Grower Name & Address: GCIA, dba Georgia Crop Improvement 2425 South Milledge Ave. Athens GA 30549 (706) 542-2351</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">GCIA CERTIFIED TURFGRASS</p> <p style="text-align: center;"></p> <p style="text-align: center;">2425 South Milledge Avenue Athens, GA 30605-1639 Phone 706-542-2351 Fax 706-542-9397 www.georgiacrop.com</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Certificate Number: TR-DMO-17-0001</p> <p><small>This grass was grown in accordance with a program designed to promote purity by adherence to published standards¹.</small></p> <p><small>This certificate must be completed and attached to each bill of lading or invoice representing certified sprigs or sod produced in accordance with the Georgia Crop Improvement Association rules and regulations for production of vegetatively propagated certified turfgrass.</small></p> <p><small>I certify the information provided is true and meets the Georgia Crop Improvement Association requirements for vegetatively/seeded propagated turfgrass certification.</small></p> <p>Authorized Representative of Grower: <u>John Jones</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><small>cc: Original to Buyer (with each delivery)</small></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><small>¹The GCIA Turfgrass Certification Standards are available at www.GeorgiaCrop.com.</small></p>
<p>MEMBER OF ASSOCIATION OF OFFICIAL SEED CERTIFYING AGENCIES</p> <p>ANY MODIFICATIONS TO PRINTED INFORMATION ON THIS DOCUMENT WILL VOID THIS CERTIFICATE</p>	

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